

Indian trade unions moving to betray Tamil Nadu state transport workers' strike

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Just as the indefinite strike by over 60,000 state transport workers in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu was beginning to get support from other sections of workers, the union apparatus quickly called it off on January 10, bowing to an order made by Madras High Court.

In an attempt to justify their treachery, union officials claimed they had “temporarily called off” the action “in the larger interest of the public, in view of the Pongal festival,” a five-day-long Tamil farmers’ harvest celebration, and until talks with state government officials before the Labour Commissioner commence on January 19.

The eruption of this indefinite strike by tens of thousands of bus drivers, conductors and technicians is part of the growth of the class struggle on a global scale.

Among the demands raised by striking workers was the signing of the 15th wage revision agreement for wage hikes, the filling of vacancies in bus driver and conductor posts, and dearness (cost-of-living) allowances (DA) for workers and pensioners that have been held up for 96 months. DA is paid by the Indian central and state governments to their employees and pensioners twice a year and is revised every six months.

Under enormous pressure from rank-and-file workers, the joint action committee (JTC) of the trade unions was compelled to call the mass walkout. The JTC consists of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), linked with Communist Party of India (CPI), the Anna Thozhilsanga Peravai (ATP), led by the former ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS).

The JTC tried to prevent a strike by holding talks with officials of the state government of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), led by chief minister MK Stalin. The

union apparatus hoped to get some face-saving agreement over the workers’ longstanding demands. However, the DMK-led state government is in such deep financial crisis that it rejected virtually every demand. Besides its huge financial crisis, the state government is also concerned that any retreat before the transport workers would encourage other sections of workers to launch similar strike action. Under these conditions, the JTC was forced to call a strike, but called it off after only two days.

The Madras High Court issued an order to ban the strike. This further exposed the courts as an integral part of the capitalist state whose chief function is to suppress the class struggle and defend the profit interests of the Indian bourgeoisie and foreign investors.

Clearly concerned about an explosion of anger from workers, the Madras High Court stated that striking workers would not be victimized and, as promised by the Additional Advocate General (AAG) J Ravindran, no disciplinary action would be taken against them if they acceded to the court’s strikebreaking order.

The Madras High Court, while hearing a plea by a right-wing student seeking to ban the indefinite transport strike, told the striking unions they should have waited until the conciliation process scheduled for January 19 took place.

At the same time, the judges said the state government is responsible for public transport facilities and therefore could take legal action against the striking workers if they conducted an “illegal strike.” In other words, if the transport workers were to strike again it would be declared illegal, and they would face the wrath of the state government.

The AAG refused to pay an ad-hoc amount of 2,000 rupees (US\$24), as called for by the unions, for each of the 82,000 retired employees whose DA has been pending for eight years. Confronted with resistance from workers, J Ravindran said the state would sort out the issues between the State Transport Corporation (STC) and the

employees.

The state transport workers have been raising these demands since 2017. Successive state governments turned a blind eye towards these burning issues of workers, which has produced ever greater hardship for retirees.

There are around 20,000 vacancies in the transport corporation because successive state governments have failed to fill vacancies caused by death and retirement. Nevertheless, in line with the increasing turn of the entire Indian ruling elite, STC has been resorting to outsourcing and contract workers.

The transport workers have told the media that the state government is forcing them to operate the buses in the morning despite their duties being scheduled for the afternoon. Additionally, more temporary workers were trained for only a couple of days to operate the buses and issue travel tickets.

During the 2021 state election campaign, the DMK made several electoral promises in relation to longstanding issues confronting state transport workers. Since coming to power, however, the DMK government has reneged on its promises to state transport workers, just as it has to other sections of workers.

After the DMK came to power in 2021, workers from various public sectors, such as child care, state electricity, sanitation and teaching, have conducted strikes and protests as the government dropped its electoral promises. It is expected that more sections of workers will come forward this year.

It should be noted that the Stalinist CPM, to which the CITU is affiliated, and the CPI, which is affiliated to AITUC, were electoral allies of the DMK. They still support the DMK as part of the opposition alliance at the national level, and they are working to provide a right-wing alternative government by exploiting the growing opposition to the Hindu supremacist and fascistic Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in the upcoming general elections.

DMK Transport Minister S S Sivasankar has openly attacked the transport workers' strike as "politically motivated," and warned of action against strikers. He lyingly claimed workers' demands would be addressed "when the financial situation improves." Tamil Nadu has the highest amount of outstanding debt among all states and union territories. The state's outstanding debt stood, as per budget estimates for 2022-23, at 75,400 billion rupees. The DMK government, like its predecessor AIADMK at the state level and the BJP-led central government, plans to impose the full burden of this

economic crisis on the backs of workers.

But workers are not responsible for the financial crisis of the state or state transport corporation and must not pay for it. Hence, workers must demand that they be paid what they are entitled to immediately.

The treacherous role of union apparatuses flows from the reactionary politics of the political parties with which they are affiliated. The Stalinist CPM and CPI have functioned as the main props of Indian bourgeois rule for decades through their political subordination of the working class to the so-called progressive section of Indian bourgeoisie. For decades, they have been promoting Congress and regional bourgeois parties like DMK as "secular" alternatives to the Hindu supremacist BJP.

At the same time, the Stalinist parties have concealed the reactionary class character of the DMK and its anti-working-class record and program. They continue to promote the DMK as a "secular" and "progressive" ally and a "champion of social justice."

The Indian working class needs to politically break from Stalinist parties and the union bureaucracies and mobilize itself as an politically independent force to rally the rural poor behind it, overthrow bourgeois rule and establish a workers and peasants government committed to socialist policies. This will be a part of broader struggle against war, social inequality and dictatorship and the fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. What is crucially needed for building such an independent movement of the Indian working class is the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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